DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 310 975 SO 020 210

AUTHOR Bergin, Joyce Williams
TITLE Obstacles to Ethics Instruction.
PUB DATE 11 Jul 88
NOTE 25p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Citizenship Education; *Ethical Instruction; *Ethics; Intellectual Freedom; Moral Development; Moral Values; *Role of Education; *School Role; Secondary Education; Social Values; Teacher Role; *Values Education

ABSTRACT

Educators are being called upon by various groups to provide ethics instruction as part of the public schools' curricula. At the same time, teachers are coming under close scrutiny for accountability as well as being subjected to decisions about education made by legislators, school boards, and the courts. Moreover, they are finding themselves caught up in the moral ambiguity that characterizes today's society. Despite public demands for ethics instruction, many educators remain skeptical of such instruction and the kinds of programs that might result from a mandate requiring schools to teach ethics. Research has provided little helpful information upon which to build workable programs of ethics instruction. It is time for everyone who has an interest in ethics instruction to pause and study the reasons why there are no such curricular components being implemented, why research is not providing the information needed to undergird the creation of such programs, and why some educators are very skeptical about ethics instruction in public schools. It is time for educators to speak out publicly and to demand an answer to the critical question: Whose ethics do we teach? (JB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED310975

502021Ø

Obstacles to Ethics Instruction

Joyce Williams Bergin

Research Paper

July 11, 1988

Running head: Obstacles to Ethics

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

JOYCE WILLIAMS BERGIN

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract

Calls for ethics instruction to be offered in public school curricula have increased steadily since 1981. Obstacles to the planning, implementation and evaluation of such programs are numerous and therefore, should be clarified and studied in advance of making any move toward mandating ethics instruction in public schools. Ultimately, the most significant question educators must ask is, Whose ethics do we teach?

Obstacles to Ethics Instruction

Concern centering around the need for ethics instruction has been building in American society over the past several years. As far back as 1981, 33% of parents, who responded to a Gallop Poll, indicated their desire for a moral instruction component in their children's curricula (Jensen & Knight, 1981). Secretary of Education, William Bennett, has often given voice to this concern through his speeches and writings (Bennett, 1987, and Sproule, 1987). Others such as television producer Norman Lear, former secretary of education Terrel Bell, California School Superintendent Bill Honig, and District of Columbia School Superintendent Floretta McKenzie have coalesced around the belief that schools should stop being value free and start introducing the concept of civic virtue, criteria for judging right and wrong behaviors and the development of personal ethics (McCaleb & Dean, 1987).

Despite this professed desire on the part of many for ethics instruction in education, a review of the literature indicates that grave problems abound. While much is being written about the need for instruction in

ethical and moral behaviors, few concrete proposals for planning, developing and implementing such instructional programs exist. The research in moral and ethical instruction which has been conducted is not sufficient for building "a comprehensive base of moral education" (Oser, 1986). An exploration of the problems educators face, when considering the development of formal programs in ethics instruction, may provide a necessary clarification of the constraints with which they must deal. It may also provide keener insight into the kinds of programs which must be developed as well as the strategies required to implement them.

Historically, Western thought has placed morality at the center of education for over 2000 years (Jensen & Knight, 1981). In the early years of American formal education, reading practice books contained didactic stories and Biblical verses. McGuffey Readers, employed during the early twentieth century, used a direct approach to teaching moral behavior by presenting poems and stories that taught explicit examples of moral conduct (Benninga, 1988). Prior to 1960, teachers were authority figures who had the

general support of the community and could make "pronouncements on personal morality (e.g., cheating, stealing, and showing respect for authorities and peers)" (McCaleb & Dean, 1987). The earliest instances of textbook censorship occurred in the late 1940s and early 1950s when fear of the spread of Communism began to take hold of the nation. Texts, which encouraged students to question critically current affairs, were denounced as un-American. At that time, "popular worries about the nation's external and internal security lent credibility to those who endeavored to rid education of critical, ethical analysis" (Sproule, 1987, p. 332).

During the 1960s and 70s, teachers began to assume a value-neutral stance, not revealing their own beliefs but encouraging students to select and express values themselves (McCaleb & Dean, 1987). While today's educators are not burdened by the attitude that criticism of political and social institutions will lead to public charges of un-American activity and professional censure, there exist certain attitudes and direct challenges that work just as effectively to stifle critical evaluation of society's institutions

as well as its values, both conceived and observed. Teachers of the 1980s have faced demands placed on all areas of the curriculum by "social groups and movements that endeavor to enlist the curriculum in their socio-political struggles" (Sproule, 1987, p.324). Further, educators themselves are participants in a pluralistic society which is in the midst of struggling with attitudes and value changes brought about in large part by the rapid advancement of technology. A burst of technological innovations seems to have outdistanced society's ability to keep up with the resulting economic, social and ethical implications. Nuclear weapons, large scale unemployment, hunger, human organ transplants, living wills that advocate euthanasia, and proposed star-wars weapons in outer space are but a few examples of the issues which must be faced by today's individuals and ultimately, by the society in which they live. Attitudes, values and beliefs held by individuals and by society at large impact all areas of instruction but exert the greatest influence on ethics instruction.

Obstacles

Advocates of ethics instruction in public schools

quickly identify rules of conduct which they believe are universal, such as, "It is wrong to lie." and "One must not cheat or steal." However, there seems to be a distinct gap between society's conceived values and its overt behaviors or observed values. Hospers (1972) writes that the unspoken moral code of many Americans contains such beliefs as the following:

> It is good to help out your friends and neighbors, but not so much that it causes you any great discomfort or keeps you from buying that second television set. It is not proper to argue with others about morals or religion because argument might cause ill will and hurt people's feelings. (Implication: it is more important for people to feel comfortable all the time than to explore together the truth about life and death, God and immortality, right and wrong.) It's not a good idea to question where a person's money comes from; if he has it, you look up to him, that's all. If a person keeps a low-paying job which he likes and turns down a high-paying job which he likes less, he ought to have his head examined. If he spends his money on books instead of lavish

> cocktail parties, he must really be out of his mind. Negroes should never be permitted to go beyond the eighth grade because Negroes are an inferior race. The United States is the best country in the world, and anybody who criticizes it ought to be deported. (p. 10)

Society's moral ambiguity can create distinct difficulties for schools that attempt to provide ethics instruction. How can educators successfully foster values and ethical behaviors in the classroom when the world outside the classroom operates in a manner that clearly indicates such concerns are not valued? A perusal of any national newspaper or news magazine or the viewing of any televised news broadcast will confirm that the values our society professes are far from the values that we, as members of the society, act upon. Our news is filled with stories of crime and corruption at even the top levels of government. Massive drug abuse that cuts across all socio-economic levels, street violence and terrorism, a loss of commitment to the quality of work performed and wanton destruction of public property, even priceless works of art, permeate the fabric of American society. The

message seems to be: teach kids how to behave in school and then send them back into a society that does not value that instruction. Cole (1986), a child psychologist, gives an excellent example of this kind of ambiguity when he quotes a young mother with whom he works:

> I know what my garbage look like: I'm embarrassed! I was even more embarrassed when my son told us he'd be willing to skip a trip to McDonald's: only go there once a week, not twice--and give the money to the poor. I didn't know what to say to that! I told him we'd think about it. I hoped he would forget his idea. I guess my husband talked with him, and that ended that! All these books about "child-rearing"--they don't tell you about that: how children can have these real "deep" questions they ask--about why is the world unfair, and why don't people practice what they preach, and why do people go to church and say they are Christians, but they don't really try to live the way Jesus said we should live, the way He did live and His disciples did. I now realize that not only do children ask such questions, but sometimes

> they'll want to do something--some of the good, good things they've been told about in church, or the things they've read or heard someplace they should do. But then we come along and we get alarmed. Oh, we say--hey: don't take us that seriously! (p. 40)

Barber (1988) states that the youth of our society are learning exactly what adults are teaching them. He contends that those who point to young people as ignorant and amoral are the same persons who market greed and self-aggrandizement through their books and speeches that loudly criticize teachers and students as being know-nothings. Barber states that:

> The kids know that if we really valued learning, we would pay their teachers what we pay our lawyers and stock brokers. If we valued art, we would not measure it by its capacity to produce profits. If we regarded literature as important, we would remove it from the celebrity sweepstakes and spend a little money on our libraries. Kids are learning well the lesson we are teaching them--namely, that there is nothing in all the classics in their school libraries that will be of

the slightest benefit to them in making their way to the top of our competitive society. (p. 6)

The moral and ethical confusion that permeates society enters the school, primarily through the values children bring from home, but also through the school's hidden curriculum. Even though a school may profess to be values-free, students are exposed to the concepts of sharing materials, taking turns, respecting the property of others and not cheating on assignments. Along with any positive elements in the hidden curriculum, there come negative elements to be learned as well. Students may receive silent but clear messages that certain ethnic, religious or minority groups are inferior. There may be strong messages that girls are not as smart as boys and that women should not enter certain occupational fields. Most often, these messages are never given voice in an open classroom discussion where they can be evaluated.

Apple and Taxel (1987) point to a common educational practice which they believe can give off a serious negative message. It is their contention that behavior modification, with its practice of offering small, tangible rewards at specified intervals in

recognition of correct responses, is most often used in schools that serve a lower socio-economic population having larger numbers of minority students. In more economically advantaged schools, students are more often taught through intellectual open-mindedness, discovery skills, encouragement of curiosity and with less stress placed upon discipline. Apple and Taxel (1987) ask the following:

> Is it ethically correct for me to teach, say, black and brown students in a way that stresses obedience, doing things for small rewards, etc., while teaching their more advantaged counterparts something totally different? I got from A to B, but for what kinds of unequal social roles am I preparing each group? We do not mean to imply here that behavior modification has no use in education--though it certainly can be and sometimes is being over used. What we do want to do is demonstrate that decisions about curriculum and teaching are not merely "how to" or technical matters. They require us to think fairly carefully not only about how we should do something but whether it is <u>right</u> for someone to

treat another person this way. (p. 163)

Another obstacle to educators who teach ethics instruction lies in textbooks, either due to their inadequate contents or through the public's reaction to their contents. In recent years, attacks from various socio-political groups have resulted in textbook publishers becoming so fearful of offending someone or some group that they have developed dull books, filled with euphemisms and incomplete in their coverage of historical events and contemporary literature (Sproule, 1987). The big business of textbook publishing can ill afford to offend those groups with the power to lobby against publishers during the critical time of textbook sales to school districts.

In March 1987 in the case Smith v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile , Alabama, a federal judge ruled that forty textbooks used in the Alabama public schools contributed to the establishment of the religion, secular humanism, in direct violation of the First Amendment rights of a group of fundamentalist children and their parents. The ruling upheld the argument that the texts undermined parental authority, failed to cover the role of religion in America's

history and even contradicted Christian teachings. In a similar case in 1986, a group of fundamentalist parents objected to the use of a Holt Rinehart reading series in the public schools of Church Hill, Tennessee. When challenged by the school authorities, the group chose to ask the presiding federal judge to simply allow their children to leave the classroom each time the Holt Rinehart series was used. On the grounds of free exercise of religion, the federal judge ruled in favor of the fundamentalist group, thereby setting a dangerous new precedent (Haiman, 1987). Theoretically, any student, citing religious objections to any lesson or text, could be allowed to disrupt the educational process by absenting himself from instruction. Such action would be detrimental to any component of the curriculum but especially so to ethics instruction and/or values clarification.

In the past, textbooks often contributed to stereotyping, sexism and racism. Elson reported in her book, Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks in the Nineteenth Century published in 1964, that her analysis of the contents of over 1000 schoolbooks revealed definite sexist and racist attitudes. Recent

research indicates that overt racism, sexism and chauvinism are absent; however, the roles of women, minorities and labor unions in the development of the American society have either been minimized or excluded (Apple & Taxel, 1987). Educators cannot rely on textbook publishers to create curriculum components that contain the kind of literature one must read and the exercises one would require in order to analyze, evaluate and criticize questions of morals, values and ethics.

Teachers who hope to supplement classroom studies with outside readings can find themselves caught up in controversy over library books. Haiman (1987, p. 327) reports that "incidents of attempted censorship of school library books and curriculum materials in 1985-86 increased by 35% over the previous school year; that the number of cases doubled from 1982 to 1986; and that 39% of the censorship attempts in 1985-86 had resulted in removal of the challenged material in contrast to 23% four years earlier."

Fallout from controversies over what ought to be taught and what is deemed offensive puts educators in very difficult positions. Since much of the

commercially prepared curricular materials as well as textbooks are written with state adoption policies in mind, teachers are left with educational tools that may seriously inhibit their teaching (Apple & Taxel, 1987). Teachers are finding themselves being forced out of the curriculum planning and decision-making processes. Current demands for teacher accountability, school districts' growing emphasis on the results of standardized achievement test scores and legislators' and school boards' attempts to define K-12 competencies for educators seem to be rendering teachers powerless in the classroom. Many curriculum materials which teachers are required to use go so far as to tell the teacher what to know, do and say. As teachers are forced to rely more and more on prepackaged curriculum materials which seek to convert skills and values into lists of competencies, they lose the power to decide what should be taught in their classrooms and how it should be presented (Apple & Taxel, 1987).

Teachers are losing power to provide a forum for discussion in their own classrooms. They are losing status as professionals. Willingly or not, teachers serve as role models for their students. How effective

a role model is a professionally trained educator rendered powerless in his own classroom? A primary example of the powerlessness of teachers can be found in the case of Seyfreid v. Walton (1981) in which a drama teacher in Dover, Delaware selected the play Pippen for a high school production. The teacher edited the script to make it suitable for the age group. A parent complained to the school superintendent that the play mocked God and prayer. While the superintendent did not agree with the parent's objection, he canceled the play on the grounds that it represented sexual content not suitable for the age group. Some parents and students objected to the play's cancellation and took the case to court. The judge ruled that, unlike the school newspaper or annual, the school play was an integral part of the curriculum and the decision about including the play should be left up to the "expertise of educators." In this case, the expert educator was not the trained drama teacher but the school superintendent who had canceled the production. The U. S. Court of Appeals agreed with the lower court's ruling (Haiman, 1987). Under these conditions, it is not difficult to

understand why many teachers do not wish to venture into the murky area of ethics instruction.

Some educators who agree with the need for ethics instruction for students do not support such programs of instruction for the public schools. Oser (1987) cites the following as reasons educators object to ethics instruction:

1) For some the terms moral and ethical instruction conjure up ideas of fake piety and pretended virtues. They point to the fact that there is no way for them to assess accurately whether a child has understood and accepted an ethical concept into his personal belief system.

2) Some point out that the methods of instruction about ethics and values lack coherence. They fear that ethics instruction often becomes nothing more than moral indoctrination.

3) Others view philosophy and psychology, two relevant disciplines underlying moral education, as being impractical in terms of aims and values promoted by teaching.

4) Most, aware that there is no proven program for ethics instruction, do not want to become

bogged down in curricula which may not work but may still be highly controversial both inside the school community and in the outside community as well.

These educators' concerns are well founded. Oser (1987) points out that sufficient research on how to develop ethical behaviors in school aged populations has not been done. The research which has been conducted is inconclusive. He explains that research has not been able to tell us "systematically under which circumstances society inhibits personal development; and we know little about the possibility of personal autonomy destroying the societal moral functioning" (p.926).

Hare (1987) examined three currently popular approaches to moral education in order to determine which, if any, met the critical test of open-mindedness. The test of open-mindedness indicates whether a proponent of a view would be prepared to entertain doubts about his own views; meaning one must open one's own mind to a moral issue and examine relevant arguments impartially and objectively. He selected values clarification, situation ethics and

critical issues. After a thorough review of each approach, Hare concluded that each of these approaches, in its attempt to counter indoctrination, actually contributes indirectly to open-mindedness; but fundamentally, each approach lacks "a positive conception of open-mindedness." Therefore, an important component of moral education is missing. Hare concludes:

> Education involves a concern for truth, and it is this concern which makes the attitude of open-mindedness a necessary aspect of the educated outlook. A fortiori, this is the truth of moral education. Those who would design an adequate programme of moral education will need to give more serious attention to the idea of open-mindedness not merely seek to avoid the grosser errors of indoctrination. (p. 106)

Summary

Educators are being called upon by various groups to provide ethics instruction as part of the public schools' curricula. At the same time, teachers are coming under close scrutiny for accountability as well being subjected to decisions about education made by

legislators, school boards and the courts. Moreover, they are finding themselves being caught up in the moral ambiguity which characterizes today's society. Despite public demands for ethics instruction, many educators remain skeptical of such instruction and the kinds of programs that might result from a mandate requiring schools to teach ethics. Research has provided little helpful information upon which to build workable programs of ethics instruction.

Conclusion

One can assume that the current calls for ethics instruction in the public schools have stemmed from genuine concerns that the values free educational climate of the 1970s is no longer desirable. Those who are asking for ethics instruction seem to be of the opinion that the schools can serve as saviors of a troubled modern society.

Unfortunately, the obstacles described in this paper suggest that educators have very good reasons for being skeptical of ethics instruction. Demands for such programs are not enough. Brainstorming a curriculum component and implementing it in response to charges leveled by school critics is not the answer.

It is time for everyone who has an interest in ethics instruction to pause and study the reasons why there are no such curricular components being implemented, why research is not providing the information needed to undergird the creation of such programs and why some educators are very skeptical about ethics instruction in public schools. It is time for educators to speak out publicly and to demand an answer to the critical question: Whose ethics do we teach?

References

Apple, Michael W., & Taxel, Joel. (1987). Ethics, power, and curriculum. Illinois Teacher of Home Economics, xxx(5), 162-168.

Bennett, William J. (1987). Sex and the education of children. Paper presented at the Meeting of the National School Boards Association, Washington, D. C.

Benninga, Jacques S. (1988). An emerging synthesis in moral education. Phi Delta Kappan, 69, 415-418.

Cole , Robert. (1986). Our moral lives. Society, 23(4), 38-41.

Gulp: Kids know only what adults teach them. (1988). The Executive Educator, 10(4), 4, 6.

Haiman, Franklyn S. (1987). School censors and the law. Communication Education, 36, 327-337.

Hare, William. (1987). Open-mindedness in moral education: Three contemporary approaches. Journal of Moral Education, 16(2), 99-107.

Hospers, John. (1972). Human conduct: Problems of ethics (shorter version). (pp. 9-37). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

Jensen, Larry C. & Knight, Richard S. (1981). Moral education: Historical perspectives. Washington, D. C.: University Press of America.

McCaleb, Joseph L. & Dean, Kevin W. (1987). Ethics and communication education: Empowering teachers. Communication Education, 36, 410-416.

Oser, Fritz K. (1986). Moral education and values education: The discourse perspective. In Merlin Wittrock (Ed.) Handbook of research on teaching (3rd ed.). (pp. 917-941). New York: American Educational Research Association.

Sproule, J. Michael. (1987). Whose ethics in the classroom? An historical survey. Communication Education, 36, 317-326.